# PROLOGUE

# (i)

# Ash Wednesday

# 22 February, 1167

# The Cockayne, Gloucester

The young boy, Harold, stood in the shade of the dappled wood, his body trembling from fear. As he looked at the horse riders bearing down on him he wished he was back in the inviolate sanctuary of Llanthony Secunda Priory. He was beginning to regret leaving the grounds without the permission of Prior Clement who liked to keep him close by his side. But something rebellious in Harold had led him outside the confines of the priory.

After the special mass this morning for the start of Lent, most of the monks had retired to their cells to begin fasting and to contemplate their transgressions. As Harold’s only transgression had been to steal the odd apple or crust of bread from the kitchen, he saw no reason to do penance. It was a cold but sunny day, one of the first that year, so he decided if he was ever going to explore what was beyond the stone walls of the priory this was his best chance. He had often heard the monks talk of a place called The Cockayne, a fish weir close by on the River Severn where the monks had fishing rights. He thought that might be a good place to explore so he set off in that direction to find it.

Harold walked through the monk’s orchard, heavy with spring apple blossom. Beyond the orchard was a thickly wooded forest which led to the river. As he made his way along the worn path, he heard the hooves of galloping horses thudding into the rain-soaked earth. The noise grew louder, echoing between the tree trunks. He turned and saw three men on horseback. For a moment Harold thought he would be mown down but they managed to pull up in front of him.

‘You boy,’ one of the men shouted, as he jumped off his horse and came toward Harold.

The man’s tone was aggressive and Harold wondered what he had done to make him angry. Perhaps he was trespassing on private land but something in his gut told him otherwise. He should have stayed in the priory with the monks. Prior Clement would be most displeased with him when he returned for disobeying the rules.

‘Yes, sire,’ Harold stuttered, his heart thudding in his chest.

‘What’s your name boy?’

‘Harold, sire.’

‘Harold what?’

‘Just Harold, sire.’

‘What do you mean “Just Harold”? Surely your parents gave you a name boy.’

The man shouted at him and moved closer, as did the other two.

‘I never knew my parents,’ Harold answered, a sadness in his voice.

‘Well, who looks after you now and why haven’t they given you a proper name?’

‘I was taken in by the monks at the priory as a baby. They just call me Harold.’

The men grinned. There was something in their expression Harold sensed but could not put his finger on. Something in their manner told him all was not well.

‘Do the monks know where you are?’

Harold didn’t answer the man. Some other sense told him he should not let them know he had wandered off. The man grabbed hold of him by the hood of his cope and shook him.

‘I asked you a question boy.’

Harold tried to break the horseman’s grip but his hands were strong and powerful compared with Harold’s child-like strength.

‘I think he’ll do for our purposes, don’t you?’ he asked the others.

They laughed, a hungry laugh.

‘He’s perfect,’ one of them replied.

With that, the horseman withdrew a wooden cudgel from his saddle and, with good aim, landed a forceful blow to the side of Harold’s head.

Harold heard his skull crack before he fell to the ground.